DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 940 SO 011 600

AUTHOR Erlanger, Steven J.
TITLE The Colonial Worker in Boston, 1775. Regional Report Number 75-2.
INSTITUTION Bureau of Labor Statistics (DOL), Boston, Mass. New England Regional Office.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 28p.; Photographs, footnotes, and bibliography may not reproduce clearly throughout original document

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Blacks; *Citizen Role; *Colonial History (United States); Economic Factors; Employment; Females; Geographic Regions; Income; Labor Conditions; *Laborers; Labor Force; Labor Problems; Living Standards; Mobility; *Political Influences; Regional Characteristics; *Revolutionary War (United States); Secondary Education; Social Action; Social Change; Social Characteristics; Social Life; United States History

ABSTRACT

This monograph focuses on the working class in Boston during 1775, the period just before the American Revolution. Seven sections describe Boston's geographical and political background; working conditions, employment, and controls; income by industry and occupation; standards of living; social life; mobility and the situation of minorities; and the role of the Boston worker in the Revolution. Boston of 1775 is described as a city of 16,000 with strong political tensions, little money, and many poor. England had retaliated for the Boston Tea Party by closing the Port of Boston and issuing the "Intolerable Acts." The faltering economy, brought about by a trade deficit with England, caused the apprenticeship system to deteriorate. By the eve of the Revolution, the unemployed and propertyless had increased enormously; the richest 25% held 78% of the assessed wealth. In general, laborers were badly paid; artisans and farmers earned somewhat more and became small property owners; professional men and shopkeepers had good incomes and merchants and lawyers were well-to-do. Debt was a recurrent problem and many debtors were sent to jail. The legal system provided a kind of equality for women who were seen as more versatile, active, and successful than their European counterparts. Finally, the Boston workers comprised the "ragtag army" which hounded the British in the early days of undeclared war, and benefited from the change that revolution produced. (Author/KC)

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# THE COLONIAL WORKER IN BOSTON, 1775

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
PETER J. BRENNAN, SECRETARY

Bureau of Labor Statistics
Julius Shiskin, Commissioner

New England Regional Office

Regional Report 75-2

# Foreword

By statute, the mission of the Bureau of Labor Statistics "shall be to acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with labor in the most general and comprehensive sense of that word." This special report on the Boston worker is replete with "useful information" about labor, not in the twentieth century but in 1775, when the ominous clouds of the Revolution were darkening colonial Boston.

Most data produced by the BLS relates to recent, present, or emerging labor problems, drawing upon historical data for insight into developments that currently concern workers. In the Bicentennial year of 1975 the New England regional office has paused briefly to probe backward in time in order to study the condition of those who applied adept hands and strong backs in the workplaces of colonial Boston as the prologue to war ended and the main event unfolded in 1775.

This study, then, strays briefly from our normal task of presenting data about the workers of today and focuses instead on their counterparts 200 years ago in Boston. The colonial toiler played a crucial role in the events of his time and perhaps too little heed has been paid him as a salient force in the social, political and economic movements of the early or mid seventeen-seventies. His well-being was at stake — his wages, his job, his living standard, his freedom, and most of all his hopes for the future.

The Colonial Worker in Boston is described in some detail — his income, working and living conditions, and the prices he paid as a consumer in the economic, social, and political climate in which he dwelt. Those who performed the manual tasks in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were prime victims of the mercantilism of the British Imperial System. International forces buffeted the colony and disturbed the workers' life which had earlier been one of relative placidity, progress, and manifold opportunities. As war approached, an avalanche of economic woes beset him, most of which had their roots in policies forged in London. James Russell Lowell wrote of the pre-revolutionary colony "Unheard beyond the ocean wide / her English mother made her moan." Several years before the Revolution, a traditional optimism had given way to pessimism among the colonial workers and by 1775 probably few other groups in Boston had greater reason to moan.

Sources are the annals, periodicals, accounts of observers, old records, and the mass of historical writings about Colonial Boston which have accumulated. There were of course few statistics to measure this Boston worker's condition in 1775 — no consumer price index, no wage statistics, no measures of unemployment or of employment. Nevertheless, a lively and revealing portrayal of the conditions of these colonial workers does emerge as a wide variety of sources are tapped and merged by Steven Erlanger, the author.

WENDELL D. MACDONALD

Illustrations originally appeared in
Diderot's Encyclopedie, published in Paris, 1762-1777.
The engravers drew heavily from English sources
and examples which were quite close to colonial
practices.

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# THE COLONIAL WORKER IN BOSTON, 1775

By Steven J. Erlanger

## Part I: Introduction

The workingmen of Boston were important to their times, for they played a prominent role in the prologue to the American Revolution and its eventual outbreak in 1775. Activities in Boston were crucial to the coming of the Revolution — and Boston was a workers' town, a small city built on the labor of its artisans, farmers, seafarers, and laborers. Although most historians have concentrated on the politicians, the merchants, the editors, it was the workers who provided the broadly-based support for a revolutionary politics. This report, then, focuses on them, on their jobs, wages, and skills, their living conditions and moods in the period just before the war began, in 1775.

The early 1770's were a time of much economic distress and social upheaval in the city, which seemed to belie the traditional colonial optimism and replace it with a despair over jobs and money that was funnelled directly into the outbreak of the Revolution. But to comprehend this distress and the Boston worker's special place in our history, some specific background is required.

The mood of laboring Bostonians in 1775 was a volatile blend of both hope and unease in contrast to the prevalent optimism of earlier times, which saw the myriad of modest opportunities close at hand and always the glimpses of great possibilities on the horizon. But this confident placidity was sharply questioned by men of all classes in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the years just prior to 1775. The political and economic shocks created by the mercantilist policies of increasingly nervous British ministries brought with them a new and disturbing notion — that the colonist's opportunities were being limited by British control, that continual dependence on England might mean future poverty, not progress.

In retrospect, America's ultimate success was due not only to the richness, fertility, and relative emptiness of the land, but also to the traits of the colonists who had chosen the arduous option of emigration. They labored in a society that saw unemployment as the wages of faulty character, that still tended to believe one's role in life was divinely set. Yet hard work was imperative for another reason: the native Indians were not peasants to be manipulated, but nomadic hunters and small farmers. There was no gold to expropriate as in Peru and Mexico — simply the land and the sea, the fish, woods, and fields. So labor, not violence was necessary to bring America's riches forth: this, too, is part of our story. The complicated narrative of the political moods and events of pre-Revolutionary Boston has been told before, and will only be alluded to here, in relating our own history of the city's workers.

Boston from its first founding had been characterized by a stern religion applied to a hazardous life, and consequently became a committed and homogeneous community. Unlike the colonies farther south, Boston had few indentured servants or captive blacks, though there were some of each, and the newspapers of the time printed advertisements for them. But Boston was spared the difficulties of large-scale assimilation so early in its experience.

The Boston climate was harsh, but there was a rich, fertile sea, forests and land — places where a man could toil and perhaps prosper. Influenced by its cohesive religious discipline,

the city had resisted the social anarchy which had troubled some later colonies. Initially, fields were laid out communally in strips, as in Europe. Barns, houses, and public works were also built communally. Attempts to enforce Europe's rigid guild differentiations governing artisans were only partly successful, and cross-overs between trades became more common as the eighteenth century progressed. Changes in working patterns, technology, and attitudes inexorably broke down the notion of communal land. Boston in the last decade before 1775 was a trading city in a countryside, a crowded urban island supplied by scattered farms and villages, surrounded by the sea which provided trade and sustenance.

## Part II: The Workers' Boston in the Early 1770's

Boston in 1774 was a large city by colonial standards, with 2000 houses and 16,000 inhabitants — a modest crowd for a Red Sox game two centuries later. Even English visitors were surprised to agree that the city "was as large, and as sightly as any but the great capitals of Europe."

Walter Muir Whitehill[1] has given us a fine picture of the city's topography then: a hilly peninsula, an island except for the Roxbury Neck where the gallows stood, a macabre warning to the wise who entered there. The Back Bay was still an area of mudflats and marshes, to be filled with the debris of the Trimountain later in the nineteenth century. The Trimountain itself — Pemberton, Beacon, and Mt. Vernon Hills — ran as a high, unpopulated ridge through the center of the city.[2] The Long Wharf, begun some sixty years before the Revolution, was the dramatic take-off point to the rest of the world. It was the center of much of Boston's economic activity, and most workers lived and toiled in close proximity.

It is not easy to comprehend the Boston of the period and the hard lot of the average worker. Even the very rich lacked most of the comforts, conveniences, and diversions that now seem to be necessities; even the ink of the rich froze on their desks in the winter. Many of the poor lived in the North End along Ann, Middle, and Back Streets or near the center, between King [State] and Milk Streets in cramped quarters and narrow streets of small houses, often two families to a house. Sunlight itself was a luxury, for window-glass had to be imported, was expensive, and often not clear.

Winters were spent in the kitchen by the hearth with one hot meal a day, for there had as yet been little progress in reducing the enormous heat loss up the chimneys. There were few mirrors, little plaster or satisfactory paint — mostly dark, smoky wood with no insulation. Candles were a major expense for the few hours of relaxation between supper and bedtime after a twelve-hour day, a six-day week. Instead of candles, many families lit with oil: the rich could afford whale oil, while the poor suffered the unmistakable odor of burning codfish in their lamps.

Water was scarce, since there were few fresh springs, and wells were quite costly; running water and rudimentary plumbing appeared long after 1800. Slop jars, outhouses,

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[1] Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History*, 2nd Edition. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.)

[2] Mt. Vernon Hill had a nocturnal population, and was labelled "Mt. Whoredom" on Lt. Page's map of 1776. Lt. Williams in 1775 indicated why: "No such thing as a Play House, they were too puritanical a set to admit of such lewd Diversions, tho' ther's no town of its size cou'd turn out more whores than this cou'd They have left us an ample sample of them."

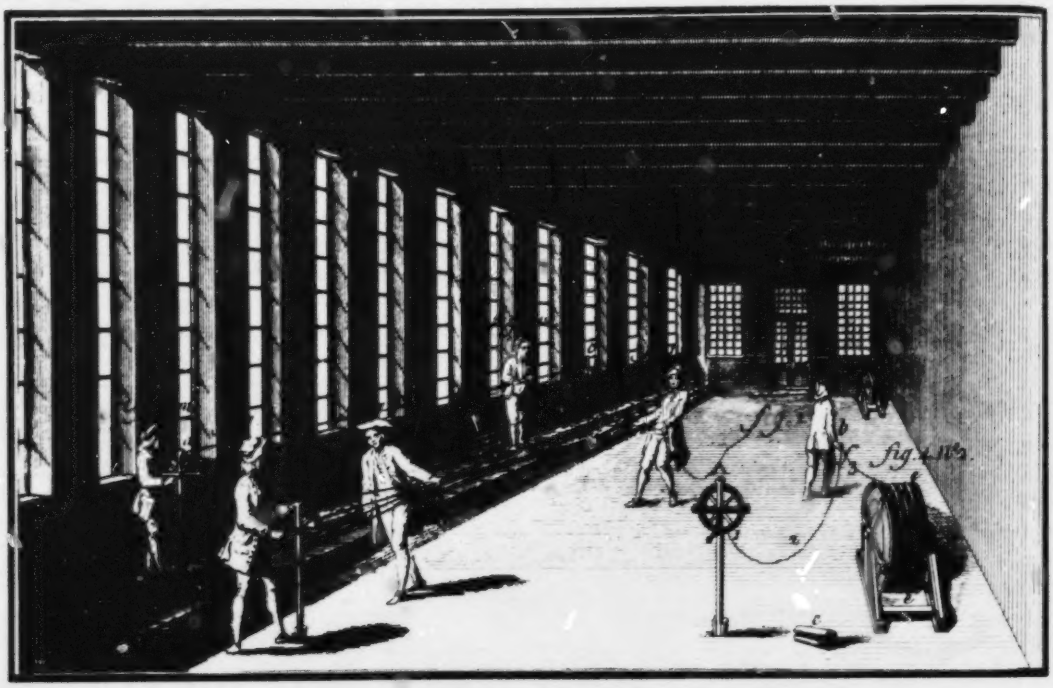
and the open sewers in the middle of each street provided tolerable, though pungent domestic hygiene. There was little ice to preserve fresh foods, so garbage mounted in the streets, feeding the large packs of wild dogs, pigs, and goats who roamed there.

Consequently infections were common, and death a frequent visitor. Infant mortality was quite high, especially for the poor: the newborn had a 50/50 chance of surviving more than a few days, with the same odds again for reaching maturity. Few women survived more than four pregnancies; as the irreverent Edward Ward commented, "The Women, like Early Fruit, are soon Ripe and soon Rotten." Still, life was cleaner, easier, and cheaper than in the large European cities, and there were few slums on the London pattern.

The North End was nearly surrounded by water and heavily populated by workers, merchants, and sailors who made their living from the sea. Those who travelled to the north, or to Cambridge or Charlestown, walked the crowded streets to the ferry — there was no bridge across the Charles until 1786. So those who worked there lived there: the shipbuilders, ropemakers, sailmakers, smugglers, the poorer merchants and traders.

The original South End was a more open area of fields, pastures, gardens, and ropewalks, dotted with many large houses set amidst cultivated land, an area of farmers, rich artisans, and merchants, with many workers clustered about Fort Hill. The Common was a place to walk, graze cattle, train the local militia, or hang Quakers. It was also a favored place for the usual semi-weekly riot between the North and South-Enders, whose rivalry continues 200 years later.

A half-century before the war, Boston contained 3000 houses; by 1776, there were less than 2000. This is one indication of some of the city's somber economic facts of life: the frequency of fires (the one of March, 1760 destroyed some 400 buildings in the center of the city); the decline in trade following the French and Indian War and the strict enforcement



*Rope weaving.*

3.

of the Navigation and Trade Acts; and the destruction of abandoned buildings for firewood after the British occupation.

Population figures are also revealing. Still the largest city in the colonies by 1740, trade restrictions had already begun to limit Boston's growth. Alone of the major cities before the Revolution, Boston's population declined and finally stabilized at about 16,000. Its economy, suggests G. B. Warden[1], could support only half of its inhabitants even then, and not until 1800 did the city spread beyond its crowded peninsula. Meanwhile, both New York and Philadelphia had passed Boston in size, and Newport was close behind.

## *The Geographical Effect*

Boston's geography helped to determine its occupational structure and set the conditions of life of its workers. Much of Boston's economy was obviously centered around the sea, in her trans-Atlantic and coastal trade. Merchants dealt in skins of cattle, beaver, and deer; in large pine masts, spars, pitch, sails and rope; in instruments, barrels, whale oil, carriages, furniture, silverware and tools; in rum distilled from Southern and West Indian molasses — in return for hardware, woolens, and some food. Most English products, including hard currency, were constantly in short supply. As economic conditions worsened, due to war, the currency reform of 1749, and the strict application of mercantilism after the Peace of Paris, the coastal trade became increasingly important, if not nearly so lucrative as the trans-Atlantic. The balance of trade swung significantly against Boston, without a major cash-crop or manufactured product as a staple to exchange. This situation had an adverse effect on the city's working class, causing much strife, unemployment, debt, and poverty. Boston was in the midst of a severe economic decline in the years just before the Revolution, and the prospects of war did not seem a bad alternative to many. The Boston of 1775 was a tense, even desperate community, with little money and many poor, who were prime candidates for the mobs that underlined the economic and political principles of the Merchants Club and Samuel Adams' Boston Caucus.

Geography was a persistently important factor in Boston's economic stagnation, and affected the worker's life in many other ways as well. Vegetables, milk, meat, and grain were brought into the city each day from the surrounding commercial farming areas of Waltham, Milton, Needham, and the various Suffolk County towns. There were scarcities and sharp dealings were common. Bad meat was often sold, and frauds like that of Amos Brown of Stowe, who sold putrid butter covered by a thin layer of fresh, were common. The poor or thrifty hurried to the Neck at dawn to buy the freshest goods at the cheapest prices. Every day was market day and haggling took place in each crowded street in addition to the Faneuil Hall area. Much of the city's flour and some of its pork and beef came all the way from Philadelphia.

The growth of other towns began to siphon off special areas of commerce. Newbury and Portsmouth took away much shipbuilding, since the forests that had fed Boston's construction and its winter fires were rapidly receding. Shipbuilding was cut by a third from 1735-1745, and more after that. The lack of wood was so crippling that many enterprising shipbuilders travelled to the woods of Maine in the winter, built a ship on a frozen river, and sailed it down to the sea during the spring thaw. Firewood by the mid-century was reaching 40 to 58 shillings a cord, and a medium-sized household burned some 50 or more cords in a year. In the winter as many as 1000 sleds a day brought wood in from Maine and the hinterlands.

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[1] G. B. Warden, *Boston: 1689-1776.* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970).

Salem and Newport threatened the West India trade; Lynn and other villages took away the butchering and leather trades; Medford poached on the rum industry; Providence deprived Boston of commerce with Norfolk County and the interior. Increasing British harassment of fishing boats and impressment of their sailors did much to discourage the once profitable fishing industry. Yet Boston seamen were a sturdy lot, as they were largely reduced to peddling up and down the coast, making many small transactions that built up, however small the initial profit.

The materials Boston traded were a motley variety: whale oil and bone from Nantucket; rum, axes, and ironware from Norfolk and Plymouth Counties; small boats and oars from Newbury; woodenware from Essex, leather from Suffolk — as well as pins, stucco, clocks, codfishhooks, tombstones, button molds, lightning rods, spermaceti candles, shoes, furniture, carriages, sails, hats, and rope from Boston itself. Yet all of these industries suffered from the effects of earlier wars, high taxes, and new regulations, as did the workers. By 1763, the tax rate on "Estates Real and Personal" reached 13s. 6d. in the pound, or some 67 %. Many workers migrated to other towns, to Salem or Lynn, or to the frontier, where land was relatively inexpensive and plentiful, if difficult to farm or even defend from the Indians, though that threat was rapidly lessening.

The larger number of unemployed poor began to severely embarrass the city fathers, and various public works — road paving, fortification mending, textile and iron manufacturing — were set up in the English workhouse mode. By mid-century, Boston had 1000 widows "in very low Circumstances" because of ship losses alone.

Ezekiel Goldthwait informed James Murray in 1770 that "There are now 70 houses in town empty and like to continue so and the number even to increase . . . " "Times are hard and Money Scarce": the Alms House was nearly always filled, and in 1771 alone charitable charges from taxes were £3506. Prices were rising: from 1769-1774, the Boston Granary Committee reported the distribution of 5060 bushels of grain at about 6 shillings/bushel, but by late 1773, Charlestown was paying 30 shillings/bushel "to those whose Avarice has no bounds." By 1774, the town of Providence even offered jobs to 60 Boston carpenters to help build an arguably unnecessary meetinghouse in an effort to aid the unemployed.

### *The Political Effect*

The woes of Bostonians — workers and merchants alike — were exacerbated by England's retaliation for the Tea Party: the closing of the Port of Boston was quickly followed by the Quartering Act and the Coercive, or "Intolerable" Acts. By August, when the British troops began to arrive in increasing numbers, the colonial period in Boston ended. Workers were tense and poor, politically impotent, willing listerners to Sam Adams and his Caucus, who preached economic liberty and political freedom. Loosely organized craft groups, like the Mechanicks of Paul Revere, served as both espionage rings and informal committees of correspondence. Such workers groups often seized the initiative from the more conservative merchants in enforcing boycotts, organizing demonstrations, and provoking incidents. Mariners were considered among the most desperate and obstreperous, but nearly all Boston workingmen were hostile to the Redcoats. The soldier was resented as an interloper, particularly when he siphoned off some of the rare laboring jobs by "moonlighting" and working cheaply. Worker resentment led directly to the Boston Massacre of March, 1770, when British soldiers sought jobs at Gray's Ropewalk and were driven off by colonial workers, only to return again and again with larger reinforcements of bored cronies.

Streets were no longer safe at night even under the occupation: robbery, pickpocketing, mugging, rape, and infanticide were widespread, as were roving mobs inspired by political events. Jails were filled with vagrants and debtors alongside more serious criminals. Without money to "fee" the jailors, most went without firewood or blankets; Suffolk County's new jail was set on fire by inmates four times between 1769 and 1774, whether to escape or merely to keep warm is unclear!

Class antagonism grew as an extension of the debtor-creditor problem, and workers joined with the patriotic gentry in despising the privileges, costly show, and aristocratic pretensions of the rich Tory minority. As war approached, particularly after Lexington and Concord, many workers left the city to the British, passing the Tories who poured into Boston at the Neck. By August 1, 1775, there were 13,000 British troops in Boston, nearly ⅓ the entire British army, and only 6753 civilians. All commerce ceased in the general atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. Bostonians both in the town and overlooking it on the hilly fortifications could only watch the Redcoats tear down their houses and businesses and even the North Church for firewood, the neat homes and mansions alike lose their paint, the gardens fill with weeds, and stray animals roam the streets. They could only watch and await a resolution of the great seige, frightening in the extreme no matter what the outcome.

But what is crucial to understand is the sense of political and economic tension and despair in Boston in the years leading up to the final conflict, in a city deeply divided by economic status and policial loyalty. This tension had an underlying cause, aptly stated by Carl Bridenbaugh:

> That social stability so long regarded as the salient feature of the slow-moving eighteenth century now seems to have been an illusion; certainly it was totally lacking on the urban scene, where there was little security at all . . . Society itself was passing through a fundamental change.[4]

In Boston, no groups entered the Revolutionary struggle with a surer comprehension of the issues over which they fought than the alerted middle and working classes. And when the crucial decisions were made, in 1775 and 1776, the tradesmen, artisans, mechanics, and laborers clearly stood to win by Independence.

## Part III: Working Conditions, Employment, Controls

"By the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat thy bread," colonial children scrawled in their copybooks. The poor felt such subsistence pressure incessantly, particularly in the city. Unemployment seemed to be the outcome of sin, for there was much work to do, and labor — especially skilled — was always in short supply. As William Penn wrote: "All provisions are reasonable but Labour dear, which makes it a good Poor Man's country."

Yet in Boston, in the ante-bellum years, unemployment was widespread, and trade restrictions common. Skilled immigrants who came there — English, Scotch-Irish, Irish, some French and Germans — found opportunities largely closed to them in the eighteenth century city. Traditionally independent and old enemies of the English Crown from their European experience, these immigrants usually moved on to the frontier where land was inexpensive, and a man willing to work could establish himself through subsistence farming and domestic manufacture of cloth or nails in a few years. Speculative land tracts in Worcester County sold for only 7 shillings an acre before the war. This migration created problems in the city, as skilled workmen entered a trade, worked for a few years until solvent or until their indentures were repaid, then bought land on the frontier to become

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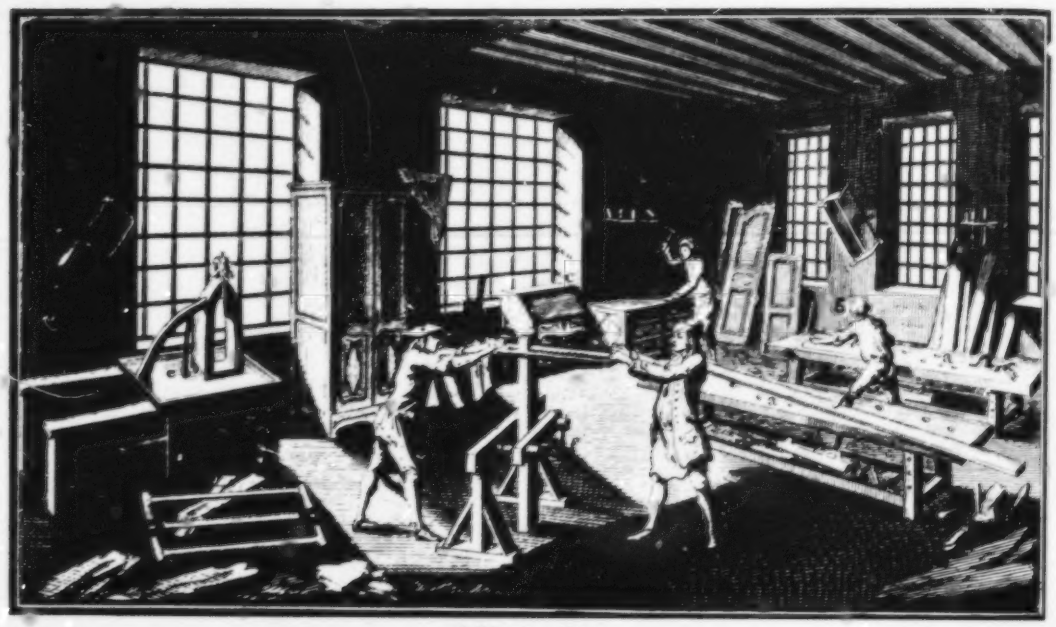
[4] Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).



*Cabinetmaking.*

self-sufficient farmers. Artisans were often offered temporary tax, military, and public works exemptions as incentives to settle in a particular area.

## *Wages*

Building trades rates in Boston are typical of those for skilled labor. From 1750-1775 they remained relatively stable in daily wages:[6]

Bricklayers — 6s.
Bricklayers' helpers — 4s. 8d.
Carpenters — 4s.
Laborers — 2s.

Rea & Johnston, painters, did work for various prominent Bostonians, and their wages present another example:

1765 To 2 days work papering a room — 12s.
1772 To painting portico at Parish House, 26 yards at 10d. — £1 1s. 8d.

An advertisement in the Boston *News-Letter* of March 8, 1770, proposed the establishment

[6] Money valuation presents a problem. Single workers were often "found," had room and board included in their wages. Often, too, wages were in "country pay": usually beaver skins, meat, corn, oats, feathers, oil, wood, or reciprocal labor by other hirelings, servants, or slaves. The value of the colonial shilling was extremely erratic and varied from area to area, usually based on the Spanish gold dollar or pistareen. It was especially confused in New England. Hard money of any type was in short supply, and cash often obtained significantly lower prices. As a rule of thumb, by the Revolution the Spanish dollar, or piece of eight of seventeen pennyweight, was worth 6 Massachusetts shillings, or 4 shillings 6 pence of English sterling. For sterling then, as Main suggests, subtract ¼.

For comparative purposes, cost of living figures henceforth will be given, wherever obtainable, in English pound sterling equivalents, the easiest and most widely used common denominator for historical purposes, or in colonial dollar amounts wherever necessary.

of a woolen mill with the following estimates for an annual payroll: one comber at £40; 4 weavers at £40 each; 15 spinners at £15; 2 boys at £15; and a manager at £100 a year. Coarse textiles of linsey-woolsey or serge were woven in nearly every home for simple family clothing. Some was sold to distributing "manufactories" for about $.05/yard in colonial currency over the century.

The wages of artisan labor remained relatively stable in the midst of economic uncertainty and confusion, causing some distress. Most industry was oriented to the simplest needs of life and provided for essentially primitive wants: crude implements and utensils, arms for defense, ships, paper, coarse textiles, and a limited number of food products. Though the city had a true cornucopia of imported luxuries to buy compared to the frontier, if a meager list by modern standards, few workers could afford to buy more than they needed to live. The general shortage of labor and the prevalent ideology of practical use combined to prevent the manufacture of domestic "luxuries" inexpensive enough for even established workers to purchase.

### *Attempts at Controls*

Almost from the beginning, the colonies attempted to deal with the labor shortage by controlling wages, hours, and prices intermittently, as most industry involved necessities.[6] Authorities instituted regulations adapted from England to keep soaring wages in line and restrict easy movement between trades, which might cause severe shortages of labor in key areas. Those men and areas regulated included porters, draymen, millers, smiths, chimney sweeps, gravediggers; slaughtering, sawing wood, grinding corn; ferry rates, wharfage and storage rates; bread, meat, butter, feathers, bricks; liquor, food, and lodging in taverns. Anyone living "without a calling" was compelled to work as a laborer on private or public projects, or was tossed into jail as a criminal. Idlers were whipped, fined, and put out at forced labor or put into the workhouse. Such measures were relatively ineffective, due to the ease of geographical mobility and the closeness of the frontier.

Such controls, however, fit early and neatly into the prevailing mercantilist ethos, which demanded high employment, compulsory labor, and a low wage scale to prevent poverty and vice and assure a favorable competitive balance for industry in foreign markets. Mercantilism hence did not tolerate "unions" or "combinations" of workers to better pay or conditions. Those who opposed the authorities' wage scales were prosecuted as criminals for mutiny, riot, or conspiracy. This policy was adequate while employment was in fact high and workers received good wages for their work; but with unemployment and a money shortage there was much tension. The story of wage and price legislation in the colonies is a strange and unsuccessful one, for localities made little effort to coordinate their regulations, and many workers simply moved to areas where the wages were higher or the laws less strictly enforced.[7]

Master workmen in some fields, especially the building trades, did combine from time to time to set prices and restrict those allowed to work. In the leather industry, tanners could not be shoemakers, curriers and cordwainers could not do either. Permission was necessary from the Boston town authorities before one could ply a trade; for political and economic reasons, this was often withheld and violators fined. Strangers could not move about freely

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[6] See the works of Richard Morris listed in the Bibliography.

[7] Many of the details of regulation can be found in the works of Morris; see also Jonathan Grossman, "Wage and Price Controls during the American Revolution," *Monthly Labor Review*, Volume 96, Number 9, (September, 1973), pp. 3-9.

in the city, and many were warned to depart — both officially by the authorities who feared increased poor relief, and informally, but just as effectively, by the craft organizations that feared competition.

### *The Apprenticed and the Indentured*

The apprenticeship system was also a crucial regulatory method, relieving the community of orphans as well as newly arrived redemptionists, and relieving the parents of providing a technical education and room, clothing, and board for their male children over fourteen or so. The apprenticed or indentured individual served in the house or shop of an artisan, who taught him his trade in exchange for necessities and sometimes a little money. The apprenticeship usually lasted seven years, though terms of five years or less were more frequent as the century progressed. Though still important, such education was particularly so at a time when industrial factories were small, rudimentary, and rare, when large machines and machine tools were practically nonexistent and steam power was not yet in use. The "Industrial Revolution" did not gather momentum in America until the boycott of English goods just before the war. The potential of an industrialized America was clear, however, and some of Britain's difficulty with the colonies stemmed from its attempt to limit such growth and hence maintain American dependence on British manufactures. But for many years, as Carroll Wright commented, even for the skilled artisan

> muscle was essential . . . and what he accomplished was secured by purely manual, frequently monotonous and irksome labor, resulting in a product generally substantial, but often clumsy, and exhibiting, as a rule, little economy in the use of material or science in the adjustment of its parts . . .[8]

### *Economic Unrest and Social Structure*

The dependency structure of apprenticeship and indentures became a shambles under the strain of internal economic growth and gradual industrial development. It was no longer effective in alleviating unemployment and preventing the proliferation of unattached, propertyless laborers. As the old, stable, agriculturally-based society lapsed, so too did its economic concepts. At the same time, Britain's increasingly dogmatic application of mercantilist theory — designed to enrich the mother country at the expense of her colonies — was translated into further restrictive regulations on colonial trade. The excess of imports from England over exports rose from £50,680 in 1700 to an annual average of £755,000 between 1761 and 1770.

Such imbalance was especially acute in the northern trading centers such as Boston, and workers suffered accordingly, as did the regulations designed to keep them in place. The trade deficit swallowed up the money needed for Boston's own economic growth. Boston acquired a reputation for rowdiness, or "mobbishness" as Thomas Hutchinson, the colonial governor, called it, and unemployed sailors were at the heart of the mob. Traders could no longer support or subsidize the work of shopkeepers, artisans, and laborers as they once did, though Samuel Adams did convince John Hancock to institute a kind of public works program to improve his wharves that employed men from nearly 1000

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[8] Carroll D. Wright was the first Commissioner of the United States Bureau of Labor, serving from 1885-1905, and is widely respected for his judicious, early work in labor statistics and labor history. Material herein is drawn from his "History of Wages and Prices in Massachusetts, 1752-1883," Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, *Sixteenth Annual Report*, (Boston: Wright and Potter, State Printers, 1885).

families, as Hancock later boasted. Children left home earlier to work, and in 1771 only 10 % of the adult males were dependents of property-owners, as opposed to 16 % 85 years before: fewer laborers were securing "found" work. Less than 9 % of those entering Boston in the mid-sixties were classified as indentured servants, scarcely enough to replace those whose terms had expired.

By the eve of the Revolution, the laboring force in Boston was twice the size of a century before. There were not enough jobs, hence intense competition. The number of propertyless had increased four-fold over the century. Artisans, laborers, shopkeepers did not maintain their relative position in the economic order as the town grew. By 1771, the richest 25 % held 78 % of the assessed wealth of Boston — the richest 10 % controlled some 65 % of the wealth, when one includes the apprenticed, the indentured, and the free propertyless workers.

Major cities such as Boston had "an exceptionally high proportion of men" at the bottom of the economic scale, for though about 70 % of the men in the Massachusetts Colony were tied to the soil, this was obviously not true in the city, where employment was more directly keyed to political and economic vagaries. By the 1765 census, Boston had 1676 houses, a population of 15,520, made up of 2069 families: 14,672 whites, 811 Negroes, and 37 Indians. Hingham was the next largest city in the colony, with only 2506 people.

As Main indicates, nearly 30 % of recorded Boston estates were worth less than £50 sterling and 40 % less than £100, contrasted with some 17 % in the surrounding countryside of small commercial farms where large estates were more common.[9] The tax assessor's book in 1780 listed some 1300 persons: the artisans, from which much of the revolutionary class was drawn, made up about a third. Men in trade, including ship captains, traders, shopkeepers, and merchants, somewhat less than a third; professionals, 3 or 4 %; laborers and mariners — relatively poor men — made up 25 % of those assessed. But this record excluded servants and slaves, so the percentage of the poor was considerably higher. Nearly a third, Main estimates, were without land or houses. In 1771, 39 % of adult males had died without any property at all.

# Part IV: Income by Industry and Occupation

## *The Laborer*

New England's businesses and farms tended to be small. The average farm was normally operated for the subsistence of a large family and one or two hired hands, with more added seasonally. Ropemakers used five to ten employees, rarely over twenty-five, and the average shipyard was no larger. Mills were run much like farms, small and self-contained. Self-sufficiency was the rule, and true poverty without prospect was rare outside the city.

The daily wage for agricultural labor in the 1770's was about 2s. currency, or 1s. 8d. sterling per day, unfound. This brought in about £30 sterling a year, with a six-day week, but labor was seasonal. "Found" was generally worth about 1s. a day in lodging, food, and rum, which liberally oiled the muscles throughout the day. The average laborer's annual income in New England was £15 sterling, quite satisfactory for slow economic progress if one was single, healthy, and steadily employed, rather precarious if one was sick or had a

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[9] Much of this material on the "social structure" of colonial Boston is drawn from both Jackson Turner Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), and James A. Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXII (1965), pp. 75-92.

family. Many of the sick simply begged or peddled as best they could until they died.

Few urban workers saved much. Wages were about the same as in the near countryside, but regulated more strictly and subject to longer periods of unemployment. The temptation to spend, particularly on clothes, was also more intense. This may help to explain why three times the number of men in the city as in the country died with probated wills of less than £50. J.B. McMaster estimates that the laborer who, in 1774,

> sawed wood, dug ditches, mended the roads, mixed mortar, carried boards to the carpenter . . . or helped to cut hay in harvest time [received] as the fruit of his daily toil one shilling . . . Sometimes when the laborers were few, he was paid more, and became the envy of his fellows if he brought home 7 or 8 shillings a week.

### *The Mariner*

The salary of most mariners, largely engaged in fishing, was similar to that of the laborers, from £1 5s. to £3 per month, though £2 8s. was usual, the equivalent of £1 6s. found in Lawful Money. Though sea commerce in pre-war New England annually accounted for some 46,000 tons of shipping and employed some 10,000 men, their work was sporadic, nonexistent after the port was closed. Four-fifths of those in Boston left no real estate. Some of course, had land, shops, and property, and one sea captain in Boston left £800 before the war, but his estate probably was acquired in shore activities. Ship captains, less prosperous than one might suppose, averaged £4 a month at sea and had little savings: 80 % of them left under £200 to their heirs. "More representative," writes Main, "was the Bostonian who left about £60 sterling, part of which was 596 gallons of rum. One may suppose that he died happy, though poor."

Whalers lived in squalid bunks of rough planking along the sides of the boat in a double tier. E.P. Hohman writes:

> The only ventilation and light came from the hole cut in the deck above for the purpose of giving access to the ladder which was the sole means of entrance and egress. This hole was thus entrance, exit, ventilator, and skylight. In cold or stormy weather, when it had to be kept closed, there was no ventilation or daylight whatsoever. Such quarters normally housed from 12 to 20 men (a number at once both tragic and ridiculous).[10]

Food and bunk space were free, but sailors, like sharecroppers, paid exorbitant prices to the company at high interest rates for any supplies purchased. They were often in debt and obliged to sail again. The proverbial sea life was clearly marginal and dangerous: many of the shops on Boston's wharves were run by the widows of men lost at sea.

### *The Artisan and Merchant*

Artisans generally had a "prosperous" situation, though were quite upset in the extensive periods of depression, since their expectations were higher: thus the worker unrest in Boston and some of the impetus for Paul Revere's "cabal." They usually earned 2 to 3 times what laborers did, depending on their skill and clientele. A common carpenter could earn as little as 2s. 6d. or 3s. a day. Housewrights averaged 3 or 4s, while shipwrights made as much as 4s. 6d. in good times. Weavers and tailors were paid by the piece, but earned approximately what carpenters did. Fully employed, a carpenter would make £45-90 sterling a year unfound, or £30-60 found — but such steady wages were "not usual." Most artisans could expect £25-30 sterling found or £40-45 unfound a year, though poor

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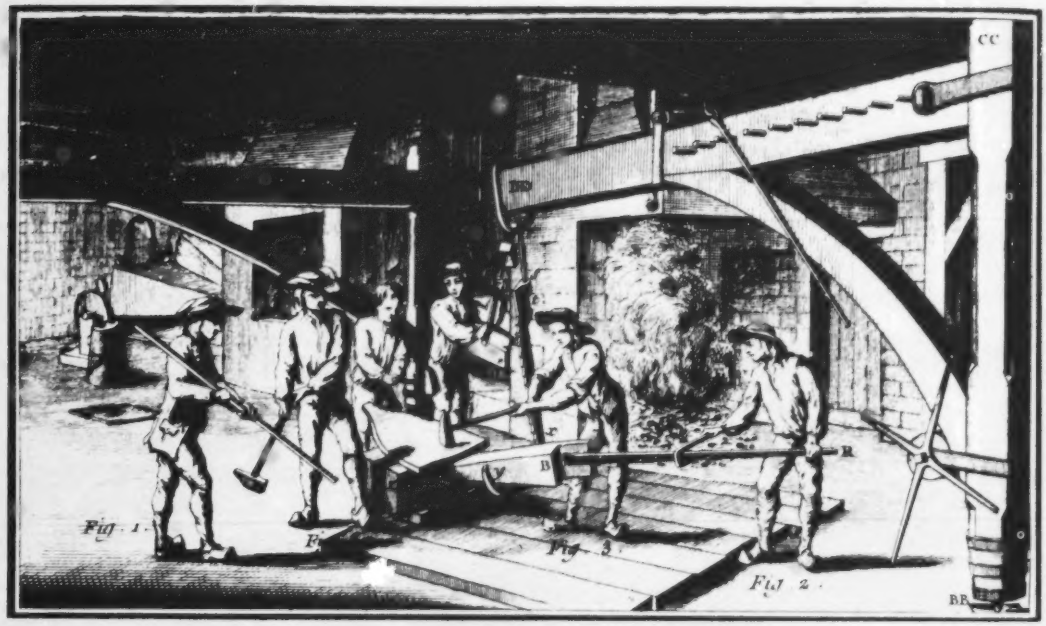
[10] E. P. Hohman, *The American Whaleman*, (New York: Longman, Green, 1928).




*Blacksmiths forging an anchor.*

ones as little as £20, good ones as much as £50. This compares favorably with the average laborer's income of £15 sterling a year.

Those master artisans, like Paul Revere, who owned businesses and employed other workers or apprentices did considerably better, especially if they sold their own finished products. They may have averaged £50 a year, though information is scanty. Some did much better. One of Boston's sixteen or so distilleries provided its Tory owner £500 a year, and a Marblehead ropewalk about the same. But a great majority of such artisans earned merely adequate incomes, as their expenses were high.

They did acquire larger estates than did mariners, fishermen, soldiers, and laborers, but only one-half as much as farmers, professional men, or those in more industrialized trades, and bequeathed only one-quarter the £440 that the average merchant left. Most artisans rented in the city and consequently left little real estate. Carpenters of this type could expect to leave an estate in ordinary times of £100-200 — "hardly a fortune," as Main notes — but 20 % of them left less than £50, though 10 % amassed £500. Tailors were proverbially poor as they worked to customer specifications by the piece, but in the larger city, selling to the rich, they earned close to the £50 average. Leather workers and cordwainers, coopers and masons did less well than the average, as did most housewrights, particularly as money tightened up. The housewrights, at least, built themselves houses, often of considerable value.

Millers and blacksmiths had some poor and few rich, but both were essential services; there were more blacksmiths than any other artisan-type, and they did best, perhaps, in the country, where they were often paid in goods and crops. Some entered into business as capitalists, not artisans, especially in the iron trade. The highest paid iron workers in this fledgling industry averaged £70-120 sterling: this was a good income, but did not provide for much property.

Distillers, ropemakers, goldsmiths, and sugar refiners had much heavier investments and employed more men. Their estates averaged some £300 sterling, 2½ times that of the average artisan, twice the American average. In Boston itself, many left over £500, and one-third £2,000: these were in the top 1 % of the population. Such men were clearly rising above the artisan into the capitalist class.

In Boston, as elsewhere, commerce offered the best opportunity for economic success, and the merchants were generally among the wealthiest men. One can estimate the annual earnings of urban shopkeepers at about £250: they clearly did better than the relatively prosperous farmers, even in a country "general" store. Merchants in the city ordinarily left at least £1000, the median being £1500. Clerks made about £40, but were often simply a merchant's son apprenticed to a friend.

### *The Tavern*

The tavern was among the most flourishing of colonial institutions, and its colorful, wry signboards were better known than the Town House. Taverns fed and often housed a good part of the working population, and served mostly cider, beer, applejack, peach brandy, and above all, rum, alone and in a variety of punches with West Indian "lymes." While they drank, Bostonians played backgammon, shuffleboard, cards, billiards, and politics — as one moralist pointed out, "every Publick Corner, Tavern, and even Dram shop is now full of pretended Politicians." The middle sort went to middle-sort taverns; Boston tanners went to the Three Horse Shoes to prevent a further rise in the price of hides. Paul Revere's favorite was the Green Dragon on what is now Union Street. As John Adams wrote:

> Here the time, the money, the health, and the modesty, of most that are young and of many old, are wasted; here diseases, vicious habits, bastards, and legislators, are frequently begotten.

It is not surprising, then, that the innkeeper left a median of £180 sterling in personal property alone.

### *Free Schools and the Teacher*

Boston was famous for its schools: its two grammar and three "writing" schools were free and public, and had from 600-800 students a year. By the mid-1700's, education took up one-third the city's budget. This was in keeping with a century-old law instructing each town of 50 householders "to appoint one within theire towne to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and reade." Towns of 100 householders had to establish a grammar school, "ye master thereof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fited for ye university [Harvard] . . . so that learning may not be buried in ye grave of our fathers in ye church and commonwealth."

Still there were few teaching tools except the rod, and few teachers had any systematic training. As Carroll Wright noted: "Such a profession as a distinct and honorable calling hardly existed." Teachers were usually young people between pursuits, or aging women, or pedagogues, "whose characteristics have been only too faithfully portrayed in story."

Many such teachers ran private academies and made rather little money and had little respect, particularly in the countryside, where male masters made 10 or 12 dollars a month, female mistresses from 4 to 10. Masters in pre-Revolutionary Boston made a good salary of £100 a year, plus other income from private tutoring to reach about £180, a far higher salary than the £40 average in the countryside, and more if they taught at a private academy or knew Latin well. Harvard in 1764 paid its professors £100, one-eighth the salary of a Superior Court judge. Tutors or assistants made a third or a quarter of the professor's salary.

Clearly none became wealthy, and those in Boston, if well-placed, lived decently. The bachelor tutor's life in Boston was similar to that of a middling laborer, for his job was normally "found." Those in academies or colleges with families had a good job but a sober life, with little luxury, little beer, wine, or tea — they made less than many artisans. A Bostonian observed that even Harvard professors could not live on their "slender" incomes, and speculated that they were all in the country preaching; any geniuses among them, he thought, would have poor inducement to stay, since they could earn twice as much elsewhere.

### *The Professional*

Ministers *were* paid quite well. In 1767, a Boston minister received a base salary of £150 (L.M.), with emoluments of another £390: £200 in wood, £64 in marriage fees, and £126 in "presents," including food. New England ministers averaged about £70 sterling, £100 with emoluments, depending upon the wealth of their flock. There were often, however, fierce quarrels between a minister and his parish about back salary and contracts: some of the motivation for the Salem Witchcraft Trials seems indirectly tied to such a dispute. Harvard-trained ministers left about £600 on the average, as did doctors. Most doctors lived "averagely" and had trouble collecting whatever fees they could wrangle, for many quacks ruined the profession's reputation.[11] The medicine of the period was a crude science. Many decent doctors opened apothecary shops or barbered on the side, where they set bones or did surgery without anesthetics or germicides. But if one were educated in Edinburgh, for example, one could do better among the rich. One such doctor had an income of £700 sterling a year; Shipton's *Harvard Graduates* reports a doctor saving £1000 sterling in a few years. There were few trained lawyers, but they made more than any of the professions, as much as most rich merchants, and with little risk. Josiah Quincy noted that in Charlestown they made between £2000-3000 a year, some ten times as much as the doctors or ministers. Even beginning clerks made £60 plus accommodations.

### *Social Stratification*

In general, then, laborers were badly paid and amassed little property; artisans earned somewhat more and became small property owners, as did most farmers, though some became wealthy; professional men and shopkeepers had good incomes and fairly substantial estates; while merchants and lawyers in particular were characteristically well-to-do or rich.[12] Boston as a society was consequently stratified into rather distinct classes, unlike the countryside, which seems more equal and "democratic," where the yeoman ideology prevailed. Boston society was generally prosperous in normal times, but unequal; bad times exacerbated the conflicts inherent in those who lent and those who owed, those who rented and those who owned.

The unruly lower class, then, consisted of laborers, some artisans and farmers; the more stable but economically wounded middle class, which made up over half of the free whites, included most artisans, farmers, and schoolteachers with some shopkeepers; the upper-middle class consisted of larger farmers, most shopkeepers, professionals, and some merchants; while the upper class was mostly merchants, lawyers, and large landowners. Such disparities were obvious in Bostonians' standards and styles of living.

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[11] See Daniel Boorstin's treatment in *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, (New York: Random House, 1958).

[12] See Main's "Conclusion" to his *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*.

## Part V: Standards of Living by Class

By 1775, most colonials, in the city or outside it, lived for necessities, had few luxuries, and worked hard for a modest living standard. Food was ample, heavy, coarse, and monotonous, with a preponderance of imperishables. Fresh, smoked, or dried meat and fish were common and relatively cheap. Familiar vegetables were homegrown and normally abundant in season, as was the mostly sour fruit of the area, typified by the "wretched Fox-Grape."

Much of this produce was preserved by housewives in large crocks sealed with paper. Spices and condiments were expensive, because imported. Beer, cider, and rum were clearly the favored beverages, though fruit brandies and sweet wine were popular among the "elegant." Many farmers also hunted, quickly driving the large animals away from the close frontier.

Food was generally inexpensive: it would cost a single man only £10-13 a year for sustenance. Clothing and lodging might cost another £10. A single man was alive and in good health with £25 a year, prosperous with £40. He might buy coarse shoes for 7s. 6d, breeches to last two years at £2, a felt hat for 5s. One can estimate £2½ for an adult's clothes in a year. "If the food of an artisan would now be thought coarse, his clothes would be thought abominable."[13] The free, single laborer, then, might need only £5 cash if found, £15 unfound each year, and still in time, if very frugal, be able to buy a small farm or shop of his own.

A family presented a distinct financial liability until a boy could be sent out to apprenticeship or a girl to service. She might mend clothes, milk cows, make butter, walk 10 blocks for a pail of water, spin flax for linen, and receive but £10 a year. Still, that was enough, for she was, of course, found. But the 3 shillings a day unfound of the good laborer was simply inadequate for family support. A family of seven (not unusual, as most families had a child biannually) needed at least £50 currency in the country, £60 in the city each year to survive: £30 for food, £12 for clothes £5 for schooling, £5-10 for rent, with firewood, taxes, and sundries easily making up the difference.

The urban laborer rented in a tenement in the alleys and narrow streets of the North End, and paid the bottom urban rent of about £10 a year. Families doubled up: eating, quarrelling, often sleeping in the same room. An entire house of renters might contain only £20 worth of furniture. Liquor was not considered a luxury, but a staple. Philanthropic societies often provided the poor with cheap grades of wood in the winter.

The artisan with his £50-60 a year did considerably better, but still spent nearly all of what he earned. He laid out some £40 for food, £12 for clothing, if his wife made all but their hats, shoes, a good suit and dress, and a greatcoat. Candles, wood, medical expenses, taxes, and supplies easily ran £6-7. Only the master craftsman who owned shops and an inventory could save at all. Most artisans owned houses, which cost them £100 or so to build with a small lot, but even so, their lives lacked the conveniences and comforts now common among even the poor of today. China, glassware, and carpets were out of reach. Anthracite coal was unavailable for household purposes, for it cost at least ⅓ more than good wood. There was little ice, and every thunderstorm curdled the milk.

The artisan lived on the margin, borrowed money short-term, was vulnerable to depression and often to changing tastes. But though he had few niceties, he had plenty to

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[13] Details of dress and food can conveniently be found in William B. Weeden, *Economic and Social History of New England, 1620-1789*, Volumes I and II, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891).

eat, was adequately clothed, warm in winter, lighted at night, and owned his dwelling. In the city especially there were some luxuries, a clock or a watch or a horse, perhaps a servant or slave, plate instead of pewter, some books. He could get a newspaper delivered, contribute to the church, dress his children in linen or his wife in brocade and ruffles, get a less stinking grade of fish oil to light his lamps, buy a brick house for £500 or a carriage or a newly invented "Umbrillo" of silk and mahogany for £8, drink madeira, grow some roses, or hire men to work in his shop for him from 5A.M. to 6 P.M.

Merchants kept grander appearances, and funnelled much of their profit — often thousands of pounds — back into inventory. They often had large debts, owed thousands and had thousands due them in unpaid and often unpayable accounts. Yet they lived well on about £500 a year, and died well, often with £2000 to distribute among their heirs. They might buy a gold watch for £27 or a luxurious carriage for £200, some four times the average price. They could invest in land or lose heavily at whist.

### *Debtors and the Jails*

The poor worker, then, had to depend largely on charity in hard times, and debt was a recurrent problem for all but the rich, due to the intense shortage of cash and the ban on worker organization for better pay and conditions. Many debtors were sent to jail, particularly if they were poor servants, laborers, or even artisans.

> The laborer who fell from a scaffold or lay sick of a fever was sure to be seized by the sheriff the moment he recovered, and be carried off to jail for the bill of a few dollars run up during his illness at the huckster's or the tavern.[14]

Such treatment effectively prevented him from working to pay off his bill. The cells were abominable places: at Northampton, they were "scarce four feet high, and filled with the noxious gases of the privy-vaults through which they were ventilated. Light came from two chinks in the wall." All classes of offenders were thrown together, the debtors with the criminals; even men confined as witnesses "were compelled to mingle with the forger besmeared with the filth of the pillory," or the "fornicator, streaming with blood from the whipping post." Criminals were often branded or had their ears cropped. The insane were tied up by the thumbs and flogged until silent, or were simply chained to the privy-bench. Capital punishments in Massachusetts totaled ten. To curse or swear or gossip evilly about one's neighbor was an act punished in the stocks, then by whipping. Prostitutes were merely fined. In the prisons, the sick were not cared for, nor the naked clothed, and the annual death rate often exceeded 60 % in the immediate pre-war years.

Still, revolutionary America was remarkable in the world at that time: it produced enough wealth to save even its poor from much suffering, to permit the great majority to live adequately, even in comfort, and to enable a few to live elegantly. A poor man, particularly if he had a skill, could, if careful of his commitments, become economically independent relatively quickly. The ease of mobility in the colonies then, compared to Europe, did much to defuse the conflict inherent in class, as did the wealth of diversions that the new land provided.

## Part VI: Social Life

When not working, there were many amusements for the laborer, beside the tavern: cockfights, horse races, church fairs and picnics, bowling, billiards, swimming, fishing, skating, oystering, marbles, cricket, waxworks, travelling freak shows, public executions,

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[14] See Weeden's *Economic and Social History*.

fireworks, wicket, island parties, whaleboat races in the harbor, cards. There were many feast days and local holidays, like Thanksgiving: the 5th of November, Gunpowder Day, was celebrated as "Pope Day" in Boston, and boys and young men carried about with much lewdness and hilarity effigies of the Pope, the Devil, and anyone else in popular disfavor. This was another occasion for a fierce North-South-Ender battle. Little children played tag, pitchpenny, "Button, Button," and "Break the Pope's Neck." The rules of that game are not available.

### *Travel and the Mails*

The culture of the city was a walking culture: workers lived near their jobs, tradesmen near or in their shops, merchants near their offices, mariners near the docks. Travel to Cambridge or Charlestown was accomplished with difficulty by boat or ferry. Roads into the interior tended to be terrible, twisted and rocky, impassable in the winter. Intercolonial travel was expensive, slow, and possible only for one in excellent health. Mail was sporadic, and private messengers were often hired. Carroll Wright reports that even after the war, the average person annually sent but "1 4/10 missives by the mails." Much information about distant colonies and lands overseas was derived from newspapers and letters, which would often themselves be printed in the newspaper as a public service.

### *The Press*

Boston had five of the colonies' nineteen newspapers in 1775, the *Post-Boy*, the *Chronicle*, Fleet's *Evening Post*, Edes & Gill's *Gazette*, and the *News-Letter*, the first regularly published paper in the colonies. The papers were owned and run by printers of various political persuasions, and usually were published in four-page sheets weekly or biweekly in printings of about 1500. They were much handed around and mailed to other cities for display in taverns. In the entire colonies, perhaps ¼ of the white population was illiterate, and ⅙ of the rest knew no English. But Boston was a well-read town, probably due to its excellent schools, and the newspapers were quite popular among all classes, providing political discussion, gossip, advertisements, shipping news, current prices, public notices, and literary bits of interest. Though unanimity among the papers was rare, and the *Post Boy* and the *Chronicle* were purely Tory affairs, there was much disapproval of the Townshend Acts, and reprinting of Dickinson's patriotic *Letters from a Farmer* . . .

The papers did much to focus and spread revolutionary fervor and convince Bostonians that theirs was not the only case of British abuse of power in the colonies. The patriotic printers Edes & Gill published the *Gazette* on paper made at Milton, with American type, and ink made by a local stonecutter.

But the papers were mostly full of the popular taste, which ran to human interest pieces, tales of the gallows, and reportage of stunning events. There was very little hard "news" as we know it. John Winthrop's occasional explanations of celestial events helped to allay metaphysical fears on the part of the populace, when faced with thunder, lightning, and the eclipse. The publication in 1770 of an "Elegiac Poem on the Death of the Celebrated Divine . . . George Whitefield," by Phyllis, a 17-year-old slave of the tailor John Wheatley, created a sensation. This spread to London, where her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* appeared in 1773.

### *Books and Readers*

The workers' consumption of books in addition to the Bible, Psalters and songbooks, primers and spellers was more limited, though Boston had 31 bookstores in the middle 1770's. Henry Knox, later a General in Washington's army and the man who organized the dragging of cannons from Fort Ticonderoga to the Dorchester Heights during the seige of Boston, was a well-known bookseller, but made some of his income as the agent for Maredant's Drops, Keyser's Female Pills, and Rivington's New York *Gazetteer.* Rivington & Miller, the largest bookstore in the town, had a stock of some 10,000 volumes and a weekly profit of £40-60. Because there was no copyright law, these printer-sellers could offer their own, cheaper editions of popular English and continental writers, and advertise them in their own newspapers. Their largest sellers, however, were almanacs and books like *Love of the Martyrs: The Dreadful Effects of Popery,* Watt's *Improvement of the Mind, Pilgrim's Progress,* and books of sermons. But even these were largely for the rich and leisured. Boston had no real library association for the working man, who was not likely to take books out of Harvard's heavily theological library, the largest in the colonies, with some 5000 books.

Main estimates that 68 % of the farmers, 58 % of the artisans, 57 % of the shopkeepers, 50 % of the innkeepers and ship captains, and 33 % of the mariners owned at least some books, though mostly these were religious, practical, or self-help volumes. The rich read literature, and 100 % of the lawyers, 94 % of the ministers and doctors, and 70 % of the merchants had libraries of which only 12 % of the volumes were religious in nature. Histories, biographies, and travel accounts were quite popular.

But the workers had few daylight hours to spend with a book, and candles were too expensive to waste them on literature, which was then considered to be a frivolous, even decadent pursuit.

## Part VII: Mobility and the Situation of Minorities

The Boston of the 1770's was a city deeply divided by wealth, but not violently so. Still, mobility into the middle class of artisans and shopkeepers was steady and common, helping to defuse the economic tension that might have led to vicious political battles within the city. The aristocracy's loss of power to the middle class was gradual and relatively peaceful throughout the last half of the eighteenth century, though it caused much worry among the élite. The aristocracy still remained vital to the city's politics and provided most of the leaders.

The taxroll of 1771 furnishes the names of some sixty men who were the largest property owners in Boston. They were mostly merchants, with a scattering of lawyers, public officials, and leisured inheritors. 30 % of them were Harvard graduates and a large majority were Congregationalist; one out of five were Anglican, later to be Loyalist. "All but a handful" were born in either Boston or Charlestown. This was a tight, ingrown upper crust compared to Philadelphia's, where ¼ of the richest men were immigrants — in Boston, only three of them were. Main estimates that some 40-45 % were "nouveaux riches."

This represents a fair amount of movement, but sparse in comparison with those who rose into the artisan-based middle class. There were few permanent proletarians, perhaps one or two out of twenty. By the Revolution, even the indentured servants had as good a shot as those initially free. Even so, the poor were not noticed much, for they had little property, no franchise, and fragmentary power. Countless were hung, whipped, pilloried, starved, and treated insensitively. Yet if one could learn a trade, one could, with some

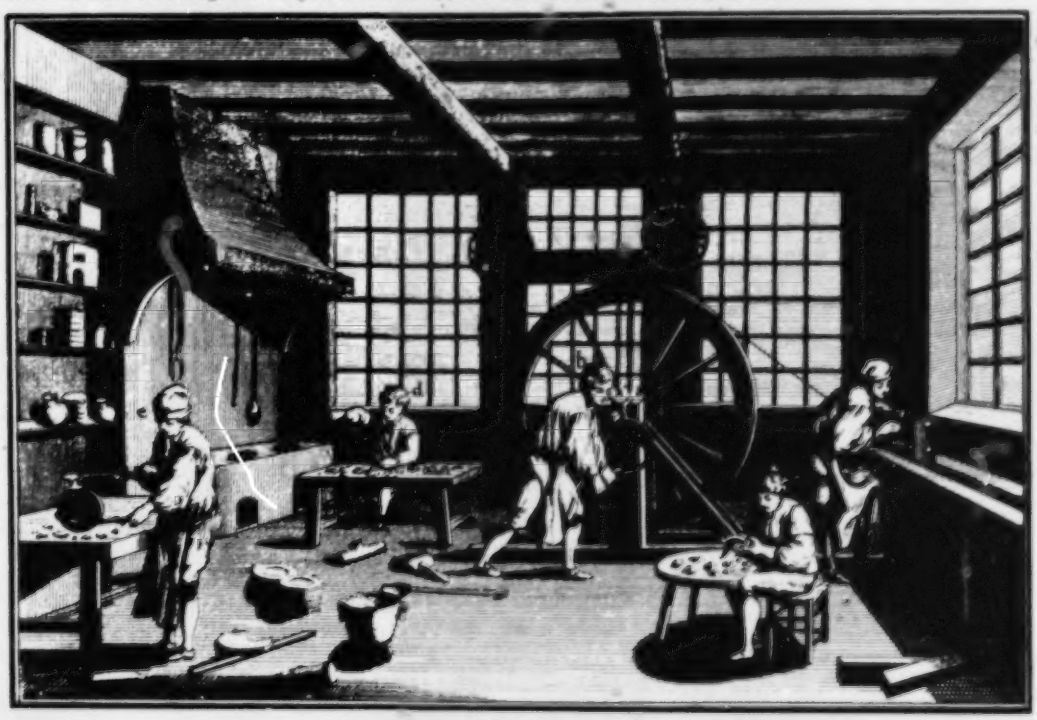
effort, become a small property owner and vote, for property qualifications were quite low in Massachusetts. Artisans were always better off here than in England; the lower class was a temporary status for most men.

### *Blacks*

But the black slaves were another matter, and their treatment was less severe in Boston, perhaps, because there were so few of them. The economy did not lend itself to efficient use of slave labor, but there were not many slaves to be bought in New England anyway. The normal route of the Triangular Trade was up from the South, from the West Indies to Savannah to Charles Town, South Carolina: by the time the ships returned to Boston, nearly all the slaves already had been bought or had died from starvation or disease. There were few left to sell in Massachusetts. The passage was cruel and difficult. The slave was allowed about 3' 10" height in the boats, but in hard times only 3' 3", with 10-13 inches of surface room. They were sold in America for £35-40 before the war, depending upon age and sex, and brought much more if they spoke English. After the war, the price rose with inflation to £50: about as much as George Washington paid for a good horse.[15]

Nonetheless, slaves were widely advertised in Boston, though Weeden estimates that no more than 2000 a year were ever sold in the city. Two examples of such advertisements: "To be Sold: A healthy, active Negro Boy, about 19 years of Age, who is strictly honest and has had the Small Pox." (From the Boston *Gazette*, February 28, 1774). "A Negro

[15] See Kitman's discussion in his treatment of Washington's expense account during the Revolution; Marvin Kitman, *Geo. Washington's Expense Account*, (New York: Simon Schuster, 1970).



*Pewter Manufacture.*

19.

Child to be given away, of an excellent Breed. Inquire of Edes & Gill." (The *Gazette*, April 4, 1774). In 1760, Boston's blacks composed 8 % of its population, about half that of New York or Newport. These included both freemen and slaves, servants, fishermen, oystermen, coopers, barbers.

The position of the white worker on the slave issue was not a laudatory one. White artisans attempted to keep them from entering the skilled trades, and white servants were nearly always preferred to black ones in New England. "Nevertheless," writes Morris, "while the proportion of Negores to whites . . . remained very small, slave labor was highly diversified and employed in many of the New England trades, both skilled and unskilled. Here as elsewhere, white workers found black competition objectionable."

### *Women*

Women made up the other distinct minority in the Boston of the time. There were few immigrants as such in the city, and all except the few Catholics and Jews were freely allowed to vote if they met the property qualification. Women, of course, could not vote at all. But they were, says Boorstin, "more prominent in colonial times than they would be again until the twentieth century." The legal system provided a kind of equality; though divorces were rare in the colonies, they were nonetheless available in the courts of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Women had a demanding domestic life with prime responsibility for instructing the children, but they were themselves not educated so well as the men. Still, general labor again tended to be scarce, and there were many opportunities for women to work outside the home: in schools, shops, and manufacturing, particularly in a town like Boston, which lost many men at sea.

Much of Boston's retailing was done by widows and the spouses of sea captains; merchants' wives often tended their husbands' shops. There were women printers and publishers, apothecaries, doctors, and merchants. "They were . . . more versatile, active, prominent, and on the whole, more successful in activities outside the kitchen than were their European counterparts."

## Part VIII: The Revolution and the Boston Worker

The status of the worker — the yeoman farmer, artisan, and laborer — had slowly been shifting as the idea of revolution developed, and as the concept of equality, which in the frontiersman had seemed an untoward arrogance, became the rallying cry of the colonies. Different classes interpreted "equality" in different ways: the merchants as economic independence from England, the workers as individual opportunity and political influence. Though clearly not strictly held, both interpretations were inherent in the growing revolt against mercantilism and its conception of man, and many in both groups saw through their differences to unite against British occupation and authority. Class conflicts returned, if they ever fully subsided, in the chaos after the victory — but the merchant hegemony had been broken by 1776.

As the Revolution approached, class lines in Boston tended to harden, yet to change. The merchant élite broke up into political factions. The Tories represented the old order of wealthy, aristocratic condescension toward the lower classes; the "Americans," a new sense of political responsibility felt by those like Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry, who saw themselves not as traitors to their class, but as qualified tribunes representing the populace, and subject, in part at least, to their will. History was clearly on the Americans' side. It would do no longer to equate democracy with mob rule, or to bemoan the fact that

in Boston "the lowest Mechanicks discuss upon the most important points of Government, with the Utmost Freedom."

There was more respect in America for the dignity and possibilities of hard labor, and more independence for the worker, who, with a little property, had participated actively in town government. The reputation of the farmer and artisan greatly improved with the war, the "yeoman army," and the universal sense of the indispensability of manufacturing. The tensions preceding the war also had done much to alleviate the usual rural-urban hatred and misunderstanding, as the Boston Committee of Correspondence attempted with some success to solicit and embody the views of the countryside. If no social revolution, the war itself was a fair-to-good leveller.

The progressive breakdown of mercantilist ideas and the institution of laissez-faire practices had begun considerably before 1775, but the role of Boston's workers in developing a revolutionary spirit in the colonies is now fully recognized. Democracy surely was not achieved with the war, as the moderate Virginian aristocrats did the most to nourish and lead the conservative revolution that the Massachusetts men were instrumental in instigating. But Morris' comment is accurate: "The process of freeing the individual from restraints that were external in origin was accelerated, and mercantilism was one of the principal casualties."

With the challenge of the British, Boston's workers did join together for political goals. Paul Revere's association of artisan spies is an example, but there are others. When in 1774 General Gage, having occupied Boston with his troops, sought among the unemployed for workers to strengthen the fortifications of the city, he could find no one. The "strike" was supported by the New Yorkers to whom Gage turned next. When he finally did persuade some to go to work, they were convinced to quit by a joint commission of Boston selectmen and members of the Committee of Correspondence. Gage was forced to send to Nova Scotia for fifty men, but they did not arrive until November, nearly winter. Boston workers were consistently grudging with the British, resented their presence and worked to forestall and irritate them. Colonial workers quickly realized that their future lay in common political action against the British *with* their employers, rather than *against* them for temporary economic advantage."[14]

The workers of Boston and the surrounding area also made up the bulk of the ragtag army, the "rabble in arms" that hounded the British in the early days of the undeclared war. Dressed in their working clothes, carrying their hunting rifles, they inflicted severe and shocking losses on the British regulars and helped to set the tone of the guerilla war. For men who had suffered through the economic disasters of the 1770's, the pay in Washington's army seemed very good. Privates and Drummers received $6 ⅔ a month, Corporals $7⅓, Sergeants $8, Lieutenants $13⅓, Captains $20. For Washington, who seems to have lived quite luxuriously during the war, this motley group of inexperienced artisans and farmers must have seemed hopeless, incapable of the discipline required to fight a real war against the best troops of the Empire. Examining his men — grumpy, rowdy, violent, and disorganized in their camp along the Charles River in Cambridge — he must have had doubts about their capacity. But the courage of the troops in the Battle of Breed's Hill [Bunker Hill] and their success in implementing the seige of Boston did much to provide him the time necessary to organize and reshape.

Having done so much to start the war, Bostonians were scarcely touched by its actual course, only by the recurrent fear of invasion throughout the eight years of uncertainty. The Revolution reversed for a time the increasingly commercial spirit of the city and the

[14] See Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America.*

country itself: the rich loyalists fell or fled, the artisans and farmers increased their political power and social status.

To be sure, the war was followed by much inflation, some 200% from 1775 through 1780,[11] but also by a new economic freedom: banks, manufacturing corporations, insurance companies, increased industry, and, at long last, a bridge over the Charles River, a project first proposed in the 1720's. Boston also went in for a spate of street-name alteration: George Street became Hancock Street; King became State; Queen, Court; Marlborough became Washington. And there was an upgrading, too: Cow Lane became High Street; Frog Lane, Orange Street; Hog Alley, Avery Street.

Boston made its peace with the new merchant princes, made peace too with old enemies, the French, after the alliance of 1778. So many French arrived, attracting so many French Canadians, that by 1788 a Roman Catholic mass was celebrated in Boston for the first time. Thus increased economic and political opportunity for the worker was followed by a more tolerant religious atmosphere as well. The American Revolution was finally as Carl Bridenbaugh has described it: ". . . an overt expression of the profound material and mental transformation which, beginning in Western Europe and the British Isles in the seventeenth century, produced by the middle of the eighteenth century in nearly all departments of life, the revolt against monarchy, aristocracy, and authority that we call modern times." The worker could only benefit by those changes he had helped so vitally to produce.

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[11] This according to the Wholesale Price Indexes of Warren and Pearson, (1919-14 = 100). In 1775, the index was 75; in 1780, 225. See United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945*, (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), p. 233.

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